

Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements

April 2023

Submission by Hamilton Field Naturalists Club

Introductory comment

The Hamilton Field Naturalists Club (HFNC) has been concerned over many decades about the impacts of duck hunting on the future of many species of duck and other birds in Victoria. While some effort has been made to improve the hunter's ability to recognise game species, the litany of reports in the media in recent years shows that little has been achieved to improve the behaviour of many hunters. Whilst penalties apply, the lack of detection and prosecution of offenders who shoot non-game and protected species, seems to indicate that the task is impossible with the policing that is currently available. Rather, the Game Management Authority (GMA), Departmental Officers and Police appear to be more concerned with arresting protesters. That is certainly an easier target because hunters who shoot protected species do not pick them up and it is hard for an observer to be sure who shot it when several people are shooting. Were it not for TV and video sources now present at some wetlands the public would have no idea of the actions of some shooters who fire at anything that flies and those who do not even bother to collect downed birds.

The HFNC has been prepared to concede in years past that duck hunting could proceed with little adverse environmental and social impact IF that shooting was done on private wetlands AND the great majority of critical public wetlands were removed from the shooters realm. That would have allowed law-abiding hunters to pursue their sport – and provide encouragement for private enterprise to re-establish wetlands for that purpose. There would also have been some benefits to other wildlife from that work. However, the GMA and Departments were not interested. Neither were they interested in setting aside any sanctuaries where ducks had refuge from hunting. Their attitude was a bloody-minded resolve to have as many wetlands as possible available to their hunter fraternity, regardless of negative environmental and social impacts or of public opinion.

HFNC had tried over many years (from 1985 to 2020) to have the 'sanctuary' status of Lake Linlithgow/Lake Bulrush complex restored, following its apparent accidental loss following the revision of the Fisheries & Wildlife Act of 1975. It had been a protected area since 1920. HFNC's submissions in 2015-2020 to the various Government Ministers were side-tracked by staff in the Departments who were determined to promote duck hunting. That continues to the present day.

The GMA (formed in 2014) is controlled by a majority of duck hunters or supporters who are not interested in making concessions. To the contrary, a former National Party Minister and, later, Chairman of the GMA board, made sure that no action was taken to close these lakes to shooters, even when large numbers of protected species were present (see below). Later, that former Minister opposed a submission HFNC made in 2016 to the Shire of Southern Grampians requesting the Shire to ask the State Government to have VEAC review the status of the Lake Linlithgow/Lake Bulrush complex. The former Minister threatened the Shire with 'an enormous fallout' if a move was made to ban hunting on the lakes (Hamilton Spectator 25 March 2017). He was reported as saying that although the lakes were of minor significance to duck hunters he and the GMA would resist any attempt to restore their status as a sanctuary.

We conclude that there is no hope that such attitudes will change with the GMA and the Department. Consequently, we believe the only feasible environmentally sensible solution is to ban all duck hunting in Victoria, in line with most of the other States.

Environmental & social impacts of duck hunting

The managers of duck-hunting in Victoria (GMA) have shown themselves to be utterly unresponsive to any calls for banning hunting on some key wetlands. If duck hunting is not banned in Victoria and the GMA is allowed to continue to operate we can expect the environmental impacts to worsen.

Some examples are given below when the GMA allowed shooting to occur, despite the presence of significant numbers of several threatened species:

- Shooting on Lake Linlithgow in 2017 after we reported 500-600 Blue-billed Ducks present.

- Shooting on Lake Linlithgow in 2018 after we reported 1000 Blue-billed Ducks and 850 Freckled Ducks present (the GMA did ban the use of boats there and that might have resulted in some reduction in the toll and disturbance to the ducks there but probably also frightened many off to other wetlands where they could also be susceptible to gunshot).
- Shooting on Lake Bolac in 2020, despite our report of 1235 Blue-billed Duck, 110 Shoveler, 65 Freckled Duck and 285 Musk Duck present in January (GMA did ban the use of boats there).
- Shooting on Lake Bulrush in 2015, despite our report of a flock of 54 Brolga roosting on the lake and working the adjacent stubble fields. The birds disappeared by the first day and could not be located again that season. The GMA cynically compensated the Brolga by ‘giving’ them the adjacent small Krause Swamp, which had just dried up! Of course no water meant that the birds could not use that to roost in at night, and it was too close to Bulrush and shooting disturbance to graze in anyway.

We note that, in April 2023, as a result of the impending inquiry into duck hunting the GMA have closed Bryan Swamp and Green Swamp from hunting in 2023. Except for water in one or two little channels, there is little water on Bryan Swamp and it is unlikely that there would be any worthwhile hunting prospect there. As for Green Swamp, almost all of that is a private sanctuary where shooting is not permitted anyway. It is a charade. The GMA want to convince the public that they are concerned for wildlife without actually conceding any significant hunting area. Nothing has changed.

We are alarmed at the decline of many waterbird species in Victoria – specifically the populations of Brolga, Australasian Shoveler, Blue-billed Duck, Hardhead and Freckled Duck. We know that many of these species (and some other waterbirds) continue to be shot by duck hunters – either accidentally or wilfully – and it has been demonstrated that the authorities cannot do much about that except ban duck hunting.

After settlement some 70-80% of wetlands were lost in SW Victoria, due to drainage. The impact of that on our duck populations has been enormous. Today we are still draining shallow wetlands for agriculture and, despite some gains where wetlands have been restored (such as Green Swamp, Walker Swamp and Brady Swamp), the adverse impact on our wild bird populations continue. The negative impact of hunting is one pressure that we can readily do something about.

Two aspects are routinely ignored by the GMA. One is the disturbance created by shooting on a wetland. The impact of just one shooter can make it impossible for members of the general public to get within about 300 metres of the birds at any time of the year – not just during the hunting season and not just on the wetlands that were shot over. The ducks are very wary and take flight. That situation is a disincentive to the enjoyment of bird-watching and amenity of tourism.

Lake Linlithgow/Lake Bulrush once had sanctuary status, from 1920, accidentally ‘lost’ after 1975 when the Wildlife Act was revised. Pressure from duck-hunting senior managers within Government departments stalled attempts over many years from HFNC to have the sanctuary status re-instated. The lakes were recognized in 2021 by Birdlife Australia as one of 6 priority sites in Victoria for migratory shorebird habitat. As a major regional conservation reserve it should not be shot over. It seems that past governments have not re-instated its sanctuary status because it might upset a tiny minority of Victorians.

The GMA and government departments refuse to support ANY sanctuaries where the birds are not disturbed by hunters. The GMA has taken the view that ALL areas should be open to hunters, except in exceptional circumstances. They have not accepted that other members of the public (some 99% of the population) have rights. Past Liberal/National Party governments even brought in a law that prevented anyone not bearing a gun from entering wetlands during peak hours in the hunting season. Imagine what impact that has on tourism – an industry that provides much greater regional economic returns than does shooting.

The second aspect ignored by the GMA is the impact of hunting on inland wetlands that are favoured by migratory waders, such as Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Curlew Sandpipers and Red-necked Stints. These tiny birds have to gain enough body mass during the autumn in order to sustain them on the 10,000 km flight to the Arctic regions where they breed. Hunting on these wetlands restricts the waders feeding opportunities. These species are finding it harder to undertake such a journey, due to

losses of coastal feeding grounds in the Yellow Sea. Surely some critical areas should be set aside to cater for the migratory shorebirds?

Economic impacts of duck hunting

Leaving aside the issues of conservation of species, cruelty to animals, negative impacts on regional tourism and on health issues from noise, unsociable behaviour and past (and present) use of lead shot, how is it possible that such a tiny minority of people can cause such a huge drain on the public purse each year? The cost of running the Game Management Authority (GMA) and surveying duck numbers could be avoided by ending the barbaric 'sport' of duck hunting in Victoria.

The claim that duck hunting has great benefits for regional Victoria is a myth, perpetuated by people with little regard for its impact on waterbirds or on the people adversely affected by the activities of the shooters. For some perspective, 99.6% of Victorians are not shooters and at least 80% do not support duck hunting.

The member for Lowan, Emma Kealy, justifies the slaughter of our wildlife on its economic impact (Hamilton Spectator 28 Jan 2022). She suggests that duck hunters contribute \$65 million annually to regional Victoria. Since in recent years there have been only about 10,000 active duck shooters it follows that the average annual spend for each of 'her' shooters is a most unlikely \$6,500. A better estimate, from a recent Parliamentary Budget Office economic analysis, indicates that the potential net spend is just \$4 to \$10 million per year – an average annual spend of from \$400 to \$1000 per person – and they found that most of that was NOT spent in the regions.

There are multi-million dollar costs of funding the GMA, plus huge compliance and administration costs, but those costs are ignored by advocates of duck hunting. And there is the negative impact of duck shooting on regional tourism that has also been ignored. Once all of these real costs are included in any cost/benefit analysis the economic arguments supporting duck hunting look pretty thin.

Conclusion

We do not believe that the GMA is willing or capable of changing to the extent that it has a major focus of protecting bird species.

We do not believe that there is a significant economic benefit from duck-hunting; on the contrary, some evidence suggests that it is probably negative.

We do not believe there is any good reason for allowing an activity like duck and quail shooting that has so many adverse environmental and social consequences.

We believe the environmental, social and health benefits of permanently banning duck hunting on crown lands in Victoria are very marked and so we support an end to duck hunting in Victoria.

PR Bird,

Secretary,
Hamilton Field Naturalists Club